Beyond Branding: The Value of Intersectionality on Streaming TV Channels

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Abstract
This article argues that independent TV channels releasing narratives of intersecting identities innovate in the organization and technological dissemination of representations, specifying cultural production in ways that more fully value communities in the United States and at times abroad. Through interviews with founders of ten currently running and defunct independent channels, I show how the value of intersectionality is not simply in branding corporate channels or supplying them with new narratives but also in critiquing and reinventing industrial practices to accommodate communities historically excluded from the system. These indie channels allow scholars to see the work of development itself, chronically understudied despite its rapid expansion through net-neutral web distribution and its legacy as the process from which all TV shows emerge.

Keywords
television, distribution, race, development, representation, Internet

In Hollywood, once a producer creates a hit TV show, they start developing more shows with existing corporate channels. Whereas online, once indie producers create a hit show, they may be inclined to start their own distribution channel. This is what Sean Anthony Torrington did after creating No Shade, a comedy about the ballroom community starring four black queer artists, three men, and one transwoman trying to make it in New York. No Shade premiered in 2013 on YouTube and quickly amassed

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a solid fan base, many of whom were upset at the mainstream appropriation of black queer vernacular—terms like “realness” and “slay” popularized cable TV shows like *Real Housewives* and *Love & Hip Hop*. “It’s everywhere now . . . I just wanted to show where it originated,” Torrington told me in 2015. He started The ARTKUTEC that year as a channel to distribute *No Shade* and other queer web series and videos online and via mobile. Seeing demand “doubling every week,”1 Torrington quickly rebranded the platform as SLAY TV, a subscription channel and platform including live events in New York. “I really, really realized the value of ownership over our culture,” he told me in 2017. Torrington reclaimed “slay” for the black queer community that popularized the term, which means to perform at such a high level as to eliminate all competition. Through new media distribution, he claimed the value of the intersection of blackness and queerness in a competitive marketplace and society that does not consistently value intersectionality.

The scale of U.S. television has expanded. Distribution has moved away from a few heavily regulated broadcast channels to many channels of various sizes, business strategies, and technologies. We first saw the rise of a few new broadcast networks like FOX and UPN and then a growing number of cable channels, driven by niche marketing: narrowcasting, dualcasting, or multicasting (Himberg 2014; Sender 2007; Smith-Shomade 2004; Zook 1999). After the commercial release of the Internet, the United States has seen the growth of a rich array of distributors: individuals creating and releasing their own shows for social media; corporate entities producing, packaging, licensing, and selling serial narratives; and an influx of cash-rich tech companies like Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Google, and even Twitter using their deep coffers to develop original programming for billions of dollars (Cunningham et al. 2016). “Network TV” is now “networked TV,” fully transformed from a one-to-many (broadcast, cable) to many-to-many (web, mobile) distribution system capable of developing a wider scale of programming. Development has expanded with distribution. Development executives purchase rights to release series, tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars for an idea or script, and many millions once a pilot or full season is ordered. Development is how series are valued for distribution. The process of development—buying shows and paying artists to make them—structures how TV executives value stories for a channel’s brand. Through branding, these shows constitute an evolving story about the channel and help solidify the distributor’s importance in the lives of audiences or fans. Distributors need to brand themselves because they need audiences to recognize their slate of shows as culturally relevant and distinct from competitors. Branding is ambivalent; it evades clear politics to turn stories into consumable products (Banet-Weiser 2012).

Historically, legacy TV development executives have found diverse cultural representation too risky and the presumed audience too small for the multimillion price tag. Particularly risky have been series embracing intersectionality, with lead characters and producers who are *multiply marginalized* (e.g., black and brown women, queer and trans people of color, immigrants who are religious minorities, poor disabled people, etc.). But since the 2010s, producers whose identities were once deemed unmarketable have secured “development deals” with cable and Internet distributors and the
brands that finance them. The most prominent of these includes the roster of diverse TV producers Netflix and Amazon recruited for development deals, some valued at upward of $100 million, including Shonda Rhimes, Ryan Murphy, Kenya Barris, Jill Soloway, and even Barack and Michelle Obama. Young creators have also secured deals after years of producing short-form digital work, including Lena Waithe, Issa Rae, Numa Perrier, Franchesca Ramsey, Nicole Byer, Jay Versace, Quinta Brunson, Amy Aniobi, Miles McKenna, Freddie Wong, Hannah Hart, and Ryan O’Connell to name just a few. The attractiveness of “short-form” producers to distributors of longer-form programming indicates the increasing value of what has historically been deemed marginal. Representation has expanded in response to rising competition in distribution and development. There are now many types of TV, short- and long-form with episode lengths from one minute to over sixty minutes. The increasing scale of networked distribution has opened a space for experimentation and cultural diversity, shifting how we assess the value of culture and branding. The distance between margins and center, on the surface, appears to be narrowing (Curtin 2009; Julien and Mercer 1988). Eager to attract attention in a competitive landscape with upwards of 450 long-form series (thirty- and sixty-minute episodes) and countless short-form series, both legacy and streaming TV channels have shown a renewed appetite for cultural difference (Ryan 2016).

We have more diverse shows, but the channels developing and distributing them are not substantially more representative. Corporate legacy channels get brand value from intersectionality but are not consistently investing in those artists/communities. Jennifer Fuller theorized that TV shows about black people branded cable channels by making them appear “edgy” and “real,” citing series from HBO’s Oz, Showtime’s Soul Food, Lifetime’s Any Day Now to a range of other programs that inaugurated the first wave of original narrative programming from cable networks in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Fuller 2010). Cable channels used cultural diversity to market themselves as different from safe, diluted broadcast TV. Herman Gray and Kristal Zook make similar arguments about why broadcast networks adopted black-cast sitcoms in the 1990s, as they turned to black audiences to stay relevant and stabilize audiences during the rise of cable; black gay and women characters played a critical, under-recognized role in this period, as did Latinas (Beltrán 2009; Coleman and Cobb 2007; Davila 2001; Fuller 2010; Gray 2004; Martin 2015; Smith-Shomade 2002; Zook 1999). But these scholars note how interest in diverse representations is inconsistent. It waxes and wanes with technological, regulatory, and organizational changes.

I argue we can expand the theory of blackness’ branding value in distribution to intersectionality’s value—the value of stories by and about characters who live on the margins of the intersections between race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, disability, citizenship, religion, and so on. They attract underserved communities, encourage social media participation, and elicit critical attention for their novelty. For large-scale distributors from CBS and HBO to Facebook to Netflix, intersectionality brands channels as adventurous or artistic. We can think of how Amazon’s hit series Transparent transgresses norms of gender and age representation or how Netflix’s Orange Is The
**New Black** represents women of color across class and sexuality. Both series, scoring a raft of Emmy and other prestigious nominations, helped establish those distributors as legitimate television distributors. Although Michael Newman and Elana Levine suggest the “legitimated” television of the networked era is classed and raced hegemonically, high-profile praise of shows explicitly shaped by marginalized identities by the mid-2010s demonstrated the industry’s own perception of diversity as value (Newman and Levine 2012).

While intersectional productions and representations have grown, intersectional distribution or channels devoted to developing these stories have not, despite the “branding value” distributors receive by representing cultural difference. Intersectional stories still remain outliers on corporate platforms, which seek surplus value from attracting underserved audiences. Hollywood does not sustainably develop and distribute stories by these creators because the high-cost of corporate production instills a fear of risk among executives, perceiving their social and cultural value too small historically (Bourdieu 1996). This leaves most intersectional creators underrepresented behind the camera and without support for financing, production, marketing, and exhibition/recognition (Hunt 2014, 2016; Hunt and Ramón 2015). Intersectionality is produced by and through institutional “matrixes of domination” (Collins 2000), either marginalized by or mediated through racial, gendered, sexual, and classed norms. This is what Roderick Ferguson calls the “multiplifications of surplus” because its value is never accounted for within existing structures yet necessary for capital accumulation in cultural production (Ferguson 2004). In her study of the black femme Kara Keeling argues that “mass-cultural” representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class creates value through the affective labor marginalized audiences produce by giving their attention to capital-intensive projects (Keeling 2007). By and large, this value is perceived as marginal, even though expanding intersectional representations would actually represent more people—for example, representing black women represents black people and women (Crenshaw 1991).

Yet if we limit our understanding of intersectional representation to series on corporate TV channels, we also limit our view of its value. Smaller scales have opened up spaces for new voices and stories. Small-scale networked distributors—or independent television channels like SLAY often based on open-access platforms like Vimeo, YouTube or Facebook—develop shorter or cheaper series and release to smaller, online or mobile audiences. For these indie web-based channels, intersectionality’s value extends beyond branding. These market actors are working to establish alternative systems that develop intersectional stories as valuable to the sustainability of the media system. They redistribute the surplus value of intersectionality, expanding development and distribution to the consistent production and reception of intersectionality. Through interviews with founders of twelve currently running and defunct independent channels, I show how indie TV channels critique and reconfigure industrial practices to create value for communities historically excluded from the system.

For indie web-based channels, the value of intersectionality is most visible in production (i.e., supporting new writers and shows) and reception (i.e., cultivating new fans for them), the same areas corporate legacy channels have historically
under-invested and started to pursue in the 2010s. In other words, specific and explicit relationships between race, gender, and sexuality are clearest to see in which producers indie channels support and which fan communities they engage. Indie executives find it valuable to consistently address cultural difference by working with creators (representation both behind and in front of the camera) and creating fans for their work by supporting intersecting cultural discourses. In doing so, channels could support Hollywood as corporations seek to diversify, but their marginalization leaves them without enough resources to fully transform the market. Because of this, in development, distribution and financing, indie channels face technical or process-based challenges. They struggle to create new brands that can finance and distribute stories exploring intersectionality. Nevertheless, their efforts reimagine distribution by actively developing that which is perceived as marginal within capitalism. Their work not only highlights demand for seeing cultural difference across all TV, but, perhaps more significantly and specifically, highlights the persistent market challenges to sustainable cultural representation in the networked environment.

The Problem of Scale in the Development and Distribution of Intersectionality

To understand the transformative possibilities of the Internet, we must first understand how the scale of distribution shapes development and how development shapes representation. Historically, corporate distributors privilege increasing the scale of production (i.e., increasing budgets for some series or the number of series overall) and audiences (i.e., more ratings or subscribers) to increase revenue, marginalizing intersectional communities perceived as too small for development. Cable and then networked distribution lowered the costs of, and increased the options for, delivering shows to viewers, but the increasing number of television shows has not coincided with full representation of America’s communities.

The history of television’s deregulation via cable offers insight into the perils of entrusting large-scale corporate distributors with advancing cultural representation (Aufderheide 1992). Struggles over representation persist even with more channels making TV. The first channel for black people, BET, has long been criticized for the ways it portrays and underrepresents the black community, particularly black queer people; the first channel for LGBTQ people, Logo, has struggled to sustain a market for LGBTQ content, even at one point floating the idea of targeting straight audiences by going “broader” (Aslinger 2009; Hod 2015; Ng 2013; Smith-Shomade 2008). Minority ownership of networks, long promised by the federal government, continues to lag behind regulations, such that Byron Allen, a leading black entrepreneur in Hollywood, filed multiple billion-dollar lawsuits against cable operators for discriminating against minority-owned networks (Littleton 2015; Pederson 2016). Research on cable distribution has been deeply critical of the industry’s claim to better quality at larger scale, particularly as it relates to cultural representation and politics (Mullen 2002). Cable programming distributors focus on the bottom line over quality of cultural representation (Streeter 1987) and serve the interests of neoliberal markets over
cultural and labor equity, as in the case of reality television (Ouellette and Hay 2008).\textsuperscript{2} Scholars of culture have shown how, across identities, cable programs create tensions around the representation of lesbian and gay, Latino/a, black, women, and youth audiences (Aslinger 2009; Banet-Weiser 2007; Freitas 2007; Sender 2004; Sender 2007; Smith-Shomade 2008). When cultural identities are addressed as markets and not as communities, misrepresentations are inevitable, as corporations promulgate the most marketable aspects of a culture (Dâvila 2001). The rhetoric and policies of unbundling cable and opening it to networked television privilege technological innovation and market competition over culture, to the disservice of democracy (McChesney 1999, 2000, 2013).

Even networked TV distributors like Netflix, presumably able to target a diverse base of users through algorithms, struggle with representation. In their pursuit of “big data,” networked distributors are replicating the inequalities of the legacy media era, privileging bigger audiences over smaller, intersectional ones (Christian 2018). For many years, black creators on YouTube have protested YouTube’s lack of interest in developing their work, forcing YouTube to create #YouTubeBLACK to promote black creators specifically (Hughes 2015; Weiss 2016). YouTube’s competitors like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon fare no better in representation of women and minorities behind or in front of the camera, according to research by Smith et al. (2016). Instead, following cable’s script, bigger networked television distributors use diversity to attract “buzz” and awards. The visibility of these programs obscures the reality that most of the executive producers and show creators do not come from the communities represented in their shows.

On corporate platforms, intersectionality has superficial branding value because development executives undervalue how sincere engagement with identity is integral to television writing/production and marketing/reception. Unionized and largely funded by licensing fees networks give to studios, writers’ rooms shape how culture emerges in TV narratives but often do reflect the communities they represent. Scholar Felicia Henderson, recounting her experiences as a television writer, argues the process by which shows are produced in the writers’ room “leads to the homogenization of ideas” (Henderson 2011, 147). Unionized and largely funded by licensing fees networks give to studios, these rooms shape how culture emerges in TV narratives but often do reflect the communities they represent. This includes cases like Jenji Kohan’s Orange Is The New Black, where a show with a plurality of black women and trans people as actors has no black writers. This notion that the best writers cannot also represent their specific cultural identity reflects Hollywood’s resistance to expanding who gets to own and control storytelling and the industry’s belief in representation as solely about visibility in casting and marketing campaigns that can brand the channel.

Visibility as a means and end reveals brand culture’s general ambivalence toward culture (Banet-Weiser 2012, 2018). We can see this “economy of visibility” in corporate campaigns like Netflix’s “Strong Black Lead,” a campaign to showcase the black actors in Netflix programming and engage black audiences on social media with
memes (Anderson 2018). The campaign isolates black representation in what is visible, as if actors are not already visible; meanwhile Netflix’s black representation behind the camera, which is invisible but materially significant to creating roles for more actors, continues to fall far below black representation in the broader population. Yet a small group of entrepreneurs are working against these dynamics by entering the realm of distribution to release and market narratives that address how race, gender, sexuality, class, and other intersecting forms of difference impact American and global lives. Established producers in Hollywood have jumped into distribution: Ava DuVernay (ARRAY, formerly the African American Film Releasing Movement), Issa Rae, (Color Creative), Jill Soloway (5050by2020), Justin Simien (Culture Machine), Lena Waithe (Hillman Grad Network) along with Elizabeth Banks, Amy Poehler, and Zoey Deschanel who all have networks for women. Previously, small TV networks were relegated to limited hours of local station programming, a few non-profit and educational channels, and public access (Aufderheide 1996; Boyle 1997).

Small-scale intersectional networked distribution is critical to our understanding of media access, democracy, and equity. It renders visible what has been undervalued and unincorporated into existing systems and the work necessary to correct inequalities. Their work is in conversation with everything from black indie cinema and Asian American YouTubers in their persistent struggle to reflect humanity through media. In her study of Asian American indie channel ISAtv, Lori Lopez finds entrepreneurs “moving beyond telebranding to engage in branding Asian America—an undertaking that inherently critiques the absence of Asian Americans within mainstream television and film production” (Lopez 2018, 256). Studies that neglect intersectional representation, distribution, and development incompletely assess the health of the U.S. media system.

Small-scale distributors create value in the networked TV market by adapting legacy TV development practices. They cultivate new creators for production and cultural specificity in reception. They experiment with a range of marketing, financing, and distribution strategies to support these activities. Organizationally, these distributors perform many of the same functions as legacy and corporate channels using some of the same technologies for distribution. Executives find, select, and fund productions, the core of development. They strategize ways to fund more productions and find a profit, using many of the same financing tools: ad networks and exchanges, sponsorship and branded entertainment, subscription, and even upfront sales, though that remains the province of large networks with the infrastructure to serve the needs of corporate advertisers. They market productions to audiences to increase viewership, relying on major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. The primary difference, however, is scale. Individual small-scale networks develop fewer series (from single digits to low dozens), release fewer hours of programming, make less money, and generally have smaller audiences. What they lack in organizational and technological resources for distribution and financing, they make up for in the range and depth of their strategies for producing, marketing, and exhibiting diverse representations.
The Value of Intersectional Production and Reception for Indie Channels

The primary ways small-scale channels create value in representation are by incentivizing the production of intersectional stories by creators who hail from those communities and by marketing and engaging with those communities after the show is produced. In small-scale TV distribution, production is focused on intersectional ownership and control over specific narratives. In contrast to legacy TV’s closed and controlled development process designed to satisfy executives’ opinions of the mass market, indie TV networks’ development strategies are open and artist-centered, as creators and producers bring specific knowledge about their communities the distributors can then integrate and expand in their slate. Independent channels challenge the marginalization of intersectional programming by investing in the production of new intellectual property and allowing series creators to sell or license their productions to bigger distributors. For this article, I interviewed Deniese Davis and Issa Rae (Color Creative TV), Numa Perrier and Dennis Dortch (Black & Sexy TV), Christin Baker (tello films), Sean Anthony Torrington (SLAY TV), Lamont Pierré (The Arthouse), Allie Esslinger (Section II), Lateef Sarnor (Kollide TV), Jonathan Moore (RowdyOrbit), Camille Irons-Coakley (Black Women’s Entertainment Network), Maurice Jamal (GLO TV), Marq Sears (Q3030), and Charles Williams (VisionTube).

Indie intersectional distributors distinguish themselves from legacy and corporate distributors by giving artists creative control and allowing them to structure narratives for sincerity and art. The artist-driven approach aligns with broader trends in television, but most corporate producers with creative control are not intersectional because they lack the credits and histories of market success due to systematic discrimination. Jonathan Moore, who ran multicultural channel RowdyOrbit for several years before shutting it down, saw his role as primarily business support, with minimal creative input. Issa Rae and Deniese Davis, chief operating officer of Color Creative TV, said they give notes on scripts and suggest writers but ultimately changes have to fit within the creator’s vision—“We wanted to be super writer friendly,” Rae said. Independent channel founders who have a specific creative vision for original programming tend to produce a lot of it in-house and retain intellectual property, as is the case with black queer channels such as The Arthouse, Between Women TV, SLAY TV, and GLO TV. Some release short-form episodes but several newer channels, including Color Creative, Black & Sexy TV, Between Women, and The Arthouse, have started to release series with twenty- to sixty-minute episodes. The growth in episode length suggests a growth in capital available for production, showing how these distributors are actively generating more value from intersecting fan communities’ affective labor.

Indie intersectional channels create value in reception and exhibition by cross-pollinating audiences from one series to many and harnessing existing fans to financially support the platform. Many of these platforms have subscription or membership programs. Indie executives use the affective labor of fans for one intersectional series to support multiple series, converting surplus affective labor value into economic value that can produce more representations. Many channel founders are
series creators themselves who produced a “hit” series or film that gave them access to a base of subscribers or followers. After *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* garnered millions of views on YouTube, Rae started to release and promote other black independent web series on her channel, eventually cutting deals with Project Greenlight, HBO, and Columbia Pictures. But we see this leveraging of fans from one hit shows in numerous cases, including Pierré’s *Freefall*, Numa Perrier and Dennis Dortch’s feature film *A Good Day To Be Black and Sexy* (Black & Sexy TV, subscription channel with programs geared toward black women and men), Michelle Daniels’ drama web series *Between Women* (Between Women TV, subscription channel for black queer women), Sean Anthony Torrington’s comedy web series *No Shade* (SLAY TV, black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] subscription channel), and Maurice Jamal’s feature film *Ski Trip* (GLO TV, black LGBT subscription channel). Once they establish an audience with one show or film and work to get it developed by a bigger platform, they occupy their time trying to grow their audience by releasing more series, often from other producers. “We aren’t putting all our eggs in that basket,” Perrier said of their development deal with HBO for *The Couple*, which had Spike Lee attached as an executive producer. Rae, along with Perrier and Dortch, have been the most committed to growing a community of writers and producers to show development executives at larger channels the breadth and depth of talent. She said starting Color Creative directly arose from frustration with legacy development and the need to give writers a leg up. “It was a learning experience but the process just felt really, really outdated to me, really inefficient, for writers,” Rae said of the legacy programmers’ wariness of cultural specificity and complexity. “They’re really relying on the same formula and not taking into account how much we’ve grown as a society,” she said in an interview. Color Creative was designed to be an incubator for talent and projects to put them into corporate development. These efforts critique the perception of intersectionality as unable to be integrated into mainstream institutions by integrating audiences for multiple projects into a pipeline for production, showing how to render material the immaterial labor of fans from different or disparate communities.

To market their channels, small-scale distributors engage multiple strategies variously attendant to identity’s intersections, and utilize writers from those communities as critical to program marketing and engagement. Not every intersectional distributor explicitly markets their channel on the basis of identity, but identity nevertheless figures prominently in their reasons for being. Inequality in representation motivated every founder of an independent intersectional networked TV channel I spoke with. Still, some focus on marketing the artistry of their work, engaging whatever audiences come their way. Lamont Pierré, founder of The Arthouse, a subscription-based channel whose primary audience is black gay men, said his intention was never to start a black LGBTQ channel. He describes making films about both black gay men and straight people before *Freefall*, the black male-led drama that “ended up hitting very quickly.” Seeing demand for black gay representations, Pierre worked to improve *Freefall*, focusing it on the theme of crime, and made three seasons before using the popular show to anchor programming for The Arthouse. The Arthouse’s slogan makes
no explicit reference to black gay identity: “Bold. Artful. Cinematic. Films + Series.” Not all of The Arthouse’s programming is black and gay, but the most popular series are. Pierre cites Arthouse’s audience as “starved for images,” echoing every independent executive I spoke to. “We don’t see ourselves,” said Davis, describing why she and Rae released pilots about black female stoners, an old black serial killer and black lesbians: “It was really about finding those stories that aren’t being told and give them a platform.” Color Creative explicitly cites its commitment to inequality in representation in its slogan: “Increasing Opportunities for Women and Minority TV Writers.” Other channels explicitly focus on gender and sexual identity differences within one race while several seek “multicultural” programs intersecting with a variety of races, genders, and sexualities. Every indie executive couched their programming strategy as attending to both specific communities with relevance for broader communities, a discursive and practical strategy to integrate intersectionality from excess to the core of distributing and developing culture for broader audiences.

Independent channels engage communities online and in cities, demonstrating a broad range of strategies and options for scaling value in exhibition. They bridge social media with legacy exhibition like festivals (film and TV fests, Prides) and screenings of premiere episodes in bars and theaters. This suggests that small-scale networked distributors expand the value of TV exhibition in an effort to represent intersectional communities closer to their specific experiences. Channels are based throughout the country, with several in Atlanta (Arthouse, Between Women TV), Los Angeles (tello, Color Creative, Black & Sexy TV), Baltimore (RowdyOrbit), and New York (SLAY TV, Kaleidoscope). Local exhibition offers a different way to reach new viewers and occasionally present opportunities to meet new producers and talent for programming. Most pursue national audiences though some, like Kolleidoscope and SLAY, frame their audience as global as they are based in a global city (New York). Nevertheless, online engagement remains key for all platforms.

Founders talk about the need to create opportunities for fans to discuss series. VHX included forums on its platform and those channels avail themselves of the option. Christin Baker, founder of tello films, talked about always responding to comments. Without the kind of “big data” Netflix commands, channels must regularly engage their fans and guide their actions. Baker frequently reminds subscribers their money goes to fund more production. Black & Sexy TV regularly introduces episodes by encouraging fans to live-tweet the episode and hosts live-streamed programming in conjunction with episode or movie viewing nights (the channel has hosted Black Movie Nights and Black G.O.A.T. or Greatest Of All Time film nights as counter-programming to the white-washed Oscars). They engage fans with history and culture specific to intersectional identities through social media. Black & Sexy TV’s Instagram features regular memes related to black women in the arts from Solange and Beyoncé Knowles; famous black TV and film characters; reposts from “black Twitter’s” responses to their own work and trending topics; and photography from Instagram, art, and magazines. SLAY TV produces videos in-house for Facebook, like one on queer history celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the House of Labeija, the first ballroom
house started by Crystal Labeija, a black transwoman, while it also publicizes black queer music videos and short films from outside its channel. Given all these innovations, it is clear small-scale distributors bring value to the television market and our understanding of development through intersectional representation in both production and marketing/fan engagement. Legacy TV distributors could borrow from these strategies to more sustainably develop intersectional programming, and doing so might improve their brands.

**Challenges to Intersectional Development**

Challenges abound in all aspects of intersectional development, not only in production and marketing but also in distributing, financing, and exhibition. As evidenced by Issa Rae Productions’ soliciting thousands of pitches for their partnership Adaptive Studios, or by Black & Sexy TV working with Seed&Spark to do the same, finding new productions can prove challenging, as small-scale operators do not receive the thousands of pitches corporate distributors do, nor do they have robust funding for production. Distributors find productions through their own social networks in cities and online, with many producing large percentages of their own programming. Subscription channels in particular need to consistently support paying customers and so focus on making their own series. For example, Baker said her goal for tello was to have a new episode every week. Original programming is value-added for their customers, but non-exclusive distribution agreements allow channels to pick up web series from platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, or their competitors to fill their libraries and keep subscribers. Several channels release short films, which are in abundance and have fewer distribution options, as a way to diversify their supply of productions; Issa Rae started #ShortFilmSundays to keep new content flowing to YouTube. 

Foregrounding identity in marketing poses unique challenges for each distributor from an organizational and technological perspective, even as it typifies their critical social and cultural value. Multicultural marketers have found reaching different communities difficult: “It is challenging to reach multicultural audiences with one kind of broad approach. Many of [the] groups in there still identify with one group or the other,” said Lateef Sarnor, founder of Kolleidoscope and a former BET and AOL executive, explicitly highlighting the ways industry cannot account for identity’s intersections. To adapt to this climate Sarnor created ONX as a separate channel from Kolleidoscope geared toward the “global black experience.” Black & Sexy TV has found success in foregrounding blackness in its marketing on social media and in its videos, while others have promoted their programming as “Urban LGBT” (GLO TV), “destroying traditional media stereotypes through unapologetic storytelling African American and Hispanic” (Rowdy Orbit), and the “global Queer community” (SLAY TV). There is no one way to market an intersectional channel and little precedent, so their success varies widely.

Financing is the core of the problem of sustainability. Advertisers slowly transferred campaign funds from legacy television to the web through the 2000s and 2010s, and mostly worked with large corporations, leaving many independent channels
starved for cash. Ad-supported channels find that brands do not buy intersectional audiences. Sarnor works with corporate advertisers to fund independent web series but said sponsors are slow to recognize intersectionality: “I’m getting very discreet asks around African American, or Latino, or LGBT.” Sarnor’s goal is to educate sponsors on the value of cross-identity marketing as his intersectional approach diversifies the range of sponsors he can engage, thus also expanding opportunities to challenge the segmentation of cultural markets in sponsorship. “The way things are being bought … still largely feels individual, specific to [a single] identity or ethnicity,” he said. Earlier executives like Moore funded series through local or regional advertisers, who value cultural specificity more than national and global funders, but these funders did not have enough funds to keep RowdyOrbit in operation.

Financing constraints marketing across social media platforms. It is best to have paid staff to create content with which fans can engage, but few platforms can afford this. Using open-access platforms like YouTube to generate interest in subscription platforms is a norm but requires executives to craft specific content for each platform, like when The Arthouse creates “shorties” or excerpts of programs on YouTube or when Black & Sexy TV releases free episodes to drive subscriptions. Creating and distributing a singular application across hardware (Apple TV, Roku, Amazon Fire, etc.) requires its own staff for technical development and support, as Marq Sears, founder of urban entertainment channel Q3030, found when he tried to create apps for smart TVs before Vimeo offered this service for a price ($500/month per app).5

Exhibition in the press and online remains a key issue. As they innovate in cultural and social messaging, small-scale operators face specific challenges related to their lack of economic capital. With bigger distributors releasing so many higher budget programs, and the revival of the diversity trend across broadcast, cable and premium TV (many years after indie producers), some executives expressed frustration for not getting the recognition of TV critics and awards necessary to grow as fast as larger peers. “We have a problem getting press. That has been our struggle,” Pierré said. “There’s a lot of innovative strides that we’ve made but we don’t get to share them.” The lack of recognition of intersectional distributors adds another barrier for their producers, who find themselves at the whims of algorithms on video and social media platforms. Intersectional channels exist to render visible (and thus, valuable) specific, complex stories rendered invisible by identity-blind networked distribution: “You have to surf through a whole bunch of stuff,” said Camille Irons-Coakley, a veteran film and TV producer who founded the now-shuttered Black Women’s Entertainment Network. “It was kind of a convergence of where we are technology-wise and the need,” referring to producers’ need for fans to have a place to discover their shows. Still, some channels are aided by recognition on larger platforms; Vimeo OTT, under its former banner VHX, promoted Black & Sexy TV alongside channels from Comedy Central, VICE, and This American Life on its homepage.

Most newer channels are subscription-based as distributors seek to directly create value from affective labor from intersecting communities—Vimeo oTT, arose as the dominant platform for indie subscription channels (Black & Sexy TV, Between Women TV, SLAY TV, and The Arthouse all used it). Subscription offers more
consistent financing but building a base of paying customers takes years, especially without the resources to license large content libraries or produce hundreds of hours of programming like Netflix. Despite the challenges to sustainability, there is some evidence independent distribution is possible: both tello and Black & Sexy TV have been in existence for almost ten and five years respectively, buoyed by subscribers who are eager for representations specific to their experiences.

Scaling Distribution for Full Representation

Legacies of inequality create intersecting oppressions that make it difficult to live through and thrive within racial, gendered, and sexually marginalized identities. Distributing intersectional stories helps us understand culture and its inequalities, better. The legacy of black and women of color feminism (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015) and queer of color critique (Ferguson 2004; Mercer 1993; Muñoz 1999) grounds theoretical concerns over different experiences of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the everyday, in history and in the artistic expressions of those realities. Television writers and creators are critical agents of disrupting existing systems through their specific narratives. Intersectional distributors amplify this power.

Founders of intersectional channels struggle to correct inequalities and develop cultural funding and awareness for intersectional stories. Their effort to engage cultural differences consistently is a source of creativity and innovation, even as it is chaotic and precarious in a market that only tolerates difference as a necessary means to raise economic capital. Thus, small-scale intersectional distributors do not operate exactly like what most scholars identify as television networks, even as they borrow some basic strategies. Following Audre Lorde’s insistence that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house in her response to black, poor, and queer women’s marginalization within feminism, their success will be based not in their ability to become the next Netflix but rather to trouble corporate logics that support and force engagement with a broader range of representations, their producers, and fan communities.

Representing intersectionality gives corporations surplus value in production and reception. But this value is rarely reinvested into the sustainable distribution and development of those artists and communities because to do so would be “risky” at the scale of production and reception corporations need to secure profits to support their size. Critical to the “valorization” of capital within the culture industry is its scale, the production of long-form, ambitious, “mass-cultural” stories about our society that generate what Keeling calls “cinematic reality,” or what Stuart Hall identifies as the discursive power of representation (Hall 2001; Keeling 2007). Fan affective labor produces value for these brands, but this process also produces “anxiety” because mass-cultural representation rarely, if ever, achieves the reality it promises to represent. The networked environment has challenged Hollywood’s symbolic power over cinematic reality, as fans themselves now routinely produce and self-distribute their own interpretations of media (Brock 2012; Jenkins et al. 2013; Moore 2013; Wanzo 2015). The distribution of small-scale stories thus challenges the limits placed on intersectionality
as reception shifts from mass audiences to smaller fan communities and as those fans can produce on their own shows (Christian 2011).

Intersectional distributors deserve as much investment as intersectional representations on corporate platforms, if not more. Without it, they face high barriers to sustainability. The cost of producing and marketing new programs places additional burdens on small-scale organizations, and they have few investors to build up their libraries and staffs. Distribution remains capital-intensive, and intersectional distribution may actually require more investment than normative representation because systems in place were not designed for it. Smaller distributors proliferate new narratives and experiment with strategies for developing them, a valuable endeavor as new technologies upend industry practices and as larger distributors show interest in “picking up” intersectional productions.

Ultimately, sustainable intersectional representation requires intersectional distribution. Even within organizational and technological constraints, small-scale intersectional distributors create value in the networked television market. Releasing hours of original programming from historically marginalized identities, these cultural workers are doing the work of pushing television to full representation and showing larger players how to do it. These narratives are the hardest for corporations to develop through established supply chains, so the success of these distributors says a lot about the possibility for full representation in the networked era.

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Notes

1. According to their public fundraising campaign, which was eventually closed in favor of private fundraising.
2. We should remember audiences are ever-reflexive about representations and capable of deconstructing narratives, if not ideology (Sender 2012).
3. Representational policies guide several distributors so they can avoid giving notes that would betray a creator’s vision. Moore said he did not release series with “violence for violence sake” or misogyny as a way of offering affirming images and counteracting stereotype. Tello, a subscription channel for queer women merged with indie film site One More Lesbian, has a “no kill” policy for lesbian characters in response to fan outrage with the deaths of lesbian characters on legacy TV series.
6. As Crenshaw (1991: 140) notes in regard to law: “operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more
complex phenomenon.” We can think of the “special classes” Crenshaw identifies in U.S. federal law (race, gender, class, etc.) like market segmentation in niche marketing or narrowcasting. Audiences can read and interpret the limitations of these categories. As much as Hollywood accumulates capital with the promise of full representation, it is never achieved, creating anxiety and misrecognition among fans/audiences who understand the depth and nuance of particular experiences and see more privileged groups disproportionately represented. This affective labor is unaccounted for in current systems, so it is shifted in support of future representations, in rare cases put into material production through fan labor (remix, parody, etc.) or, even rarer, funneled into the creation of alternative distribution systems of representation such as those in their article.

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**Author Biography**